

Preparing Your Child to Return to School Following the Death of a Loved One

- 1. Talk to your child.** Help them understand how difficult it is to return to school and yet while it is hard you will assist them until they feel more comfortable.
- 2. Reassure your child.** Give them instructions on how they may reach you during the day and permission to call you when they need encouragement. Tell them where you will be while they are at school. Your child is learning about mortality issues. With this concern for your well being they need to know that you are safe and in familiar surroundings. At first they may need to phone you frequently but over time they will adjust. Be patient with this process and do not force it along.
- 3. Talk to your child's principal, teacher and counselor.** Give clear information about the death and what understandings the child has about those details. Determine a plan for emotional safety with their teacher. Teens may be resistant to this step but for their well being it is imperative that they have a plan of action.

This plan should include permission for your child to leave the classroom if necessary. Children are easily embarrassed by their "grief bursts" and need to establish control. Through a prearranged signal with their teacher your child will understand they may leave the classroom and go to the nurse or counselor. Learning to manage their emotions in an appropriate manner increases self esteem. Leaving emotional reactions unaddressed teaches the child that being resistant, unresponsive and acting out is the acceptable way to get attention or removal from the classroom.

***NOTE:** Teach your school administrators and faculty about how children grieve differently from adults. Remember that children take breaks from grief and appear to be "going on with their lives." Often when playing and laughing they appear to not be thinking about the death. Children contain and express their grief in different ways, therefore they may react more strongly to disappointments (low grades, reprimands or playground injuries), crying inconsolably or louder for long periods of time. When your child reacts to their loss we call this a "grief burst." This is normal behavior and may be a pattern for months and years following the death and can be overwhelming at times for those caring for your child. As children learn to manage their grief the deep emotional pain lessens.*

- 4. Be patient.** Children have difficulty concentrating and focusing on schoolwork following the death of a loved one. There is no magic timetable to determine when your child will have more energy to devote to the rigors of academics. Some children improve after 3 months while many more are still experiencing difficulty 1-2 years after the death. This is normal just as it is for adults who have trouble finding a new routine at work or in their daily lives.

Many daily triggers remind children that their loved ones are dead. Often classroom work and subject matter, conversations or playground activities serve as painful reminders sending a child plummeting with these thoughts and memories. Listen carefully to what your child is telling you about their school day.

- 5. Teach your child about your grief.** When you do not cry in front of your child or share with them how difficult your day has been they feel isolated in their grief. They make false assumptions about your love for the person who died and often get mixed signals about normal grief reactions. This is a difficult time for all family members and rarely will all the family be sad at the same time. Use this as a positive way to reach out for support or to open yourself to assist another. The pain will not be this intense forever, patient encouragement and support will promote healing.

- 6. Young adults and college age need support.** While young people are eagerly establishing a place for themselves away from home it can also be a very painful and difficult process. Fears and worries intensify when your child is not home or around familiar faces. Some common thoughts and questions are: not feeling as connected to family and friends; increased loneliness; wondering if my loved ones will be okay while I'm away; trouble concentrating or going to classes or work. Be sure to establish a routine of initiating contact with your young adult. Expect this to be a one way communication for a while. They will appreciate your encouragement.